

To: aludwig@pop.uky.edu
Fcc: /jm/BIOG, TXT
Subject: How do we know who we are? Biography of the self.
Date: Sat Aug 10 13:58:56 EDT 2002

Dear Arnold

Again, so many thanks for your book, and the inscription!

I opened it, and the page that came immediately to view, 127, spoke to me instantly: "To demonstrate our control over Nature, we may turn to science or philosophy to unravel the secrets of the universe." But I would modulate "control over" with "empathy with", with quest for meaning.

I enjoyed reading your letter very much, and am sure will the same your book. Your questions were provocative, and helpful to me since it's hard from the inside to know what tacit knowledge needs to be brought to the surface. So I will have to say more about my theological journey; though already as a teen-ager I would have identified myself with Spinoza's theism. (I was quite startled to hear Spinoza cited with approbation at a meeting of the Pontifical Academy of Sciences at the Vatican!).

The factual question I had put to you, was to identify works that showed how or whether personal detail illuminated intellectual biography of scientists. That might inform how far I would go, e.g., in discussing the failure of my first marriage (1946-1967), which is concretely but barely intellectually intertwined with my research career [notwithstanding Esther and I coauthored a number of important papers.]

Your letter initiated an imaginary dialogue I might have with you (all in my own head) that is already fruitful. I can think of no better exemplar for my own memoir than Bram Pais' biography of Niels Bohr, a work I cannot commend too highly. "Copenhagen" notwithstanding, there's very little there of personal revelation. After I've done my homework with "How ..." I might try to prevail on you for some more interactive conversation by phone. You and I do share a passion for "collecting lives" -- reading my old journals I am seized with curiosity how did many of those "experiments" turn out 50+ years later. The WWW is wonderful: in a few cases I've actually orchestrated belated reunions.

Re "writing fiction", I was amused to see that. I'd just been thinking, were there world enough and time, I might fictionalize my diaries into a few short stories, to start a Bildungsroman about the contrast of "man is the rational animal" and the clatter of emotion in just-postadolescent interpersonal complexities.

To Aline: How gracious of you to join this seminar!!

I do recognize a lot of what you speculated: alienation from my age peers (I'm talking age 7 ff!) doubtless both stemmed from, and was a reinforcement to, my precocious monomania about "learning everything there was to be learned". So I won't try to refute career choice of science as a sanctuary. Do you know the movie "Sand Pebbles", Steve McQueen's

attachment to nautical machinery as reliable and predictable, contra the turbulence of people. That movie was not part of my developmental experience; Plato and the Stoics were conveying a similar message. And I identified myself with Cephalus.

But I could hardly describe myself as lacking introspection; likely the opposite to a fault, especially as a youngster. And I hungered for company I could match wits with; so on through adolescence I was fondly nurtured by many adults - teachers, librarians - but was lonely for friends, either sex, near my own age.

So this discussion helps answer one of my own questions, how these elements of personality shape central choices of career. I certainly will look up "Price of Greatness." Do you know Eiduson, B. T., Beckman, L., eds. 1973. Science as a Career Choice: Theoretical and empirical studies. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

Writing a memoir is (mostly) my own initiative; almost 30 years ago I began to realize that "historians" were already beginning to distort the reality [say history of molecular biology] of what I could recall from my own memory and documentation. And my mentor, Ed Tatum, died in 1975, and it was left to me to write a biographical memoir; and the experience showed me how frail was the historiographic trail. As soon as 1995, it still took me a fair bit of detective work to locate his daughters; hardly anything remained anywhere of his own papers. But if you're curious see: <http://profiles.nlm.nih.gov/BB/A/B/N/U> for what I did write about him.

I knew a good deal more than I cared to write about his relationship with his wives. Why bring that up? I felt a bit uncomfortable just writing what little I did; and his first wife June was still extant at the time.

So, the way my own mind works, once I think of "biography", I want to get a good understanding of the issues and options, and make a strategically informed choice. The papers/archives are there for others to make do what they will.

Again, I very much appreciate your interest!

Joshua

Reply-to: lederberg@mail.rockefeller.edu

====

Re collecting lives:

<http://profiles.nlm.nih.gov/BB/A/B/N/Y/>
